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Viewing cable 06DAMASCUS517, THE MUSLIM BROTHERS IN SYRIA; PART I: COULD THEY

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- The top box shows each cable's unique reference number, when and by whom it originally was sent, and what its initial classification was.
- The middle box contains the header information that is associated with the cable. It includes information about the receiver(s) as well as a general subject.
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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06DAMASCUS517	2006-02-08 15:47	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Damascus

Appears in these articles:

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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000517

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PARIS FOR ZEYA; LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/12/2015
TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER KISL KDEM SY
SUBJECT: THE MUSLIM BROTHERS IN SYRIA; PART I: COULD THEY
WIN AN ELECTION HERE?

REF: 05 DAMASCUS 1377

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche, per 1.4 b,d.

¶1. (U) This is the first of two cables that assess the potential political influence of the Muslim Brothers in Syria.

¶2. (U) PART I. DIFFICULTIES IN ASSESSING MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD POWER; CONSTRAINTS ON MB INFLUENCE

¶3. (C) Summary: In the wake of former VP Khaddam's flirtation with the Muslim Brotherhood's exiled leadership in January, and Hamas's recent electoral victory in the Palestinian territories, many observers of the Syrian political scene are asking themselves what kind of political power (or potential) the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist elements have here in Syria. While there has been a

rise in Islamism (with some fundamentalism) in Syria in the past 20 years, we assess that the potential political influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria has been exaggerated. Putting aside likely continued SARG opposition, the most striking constraint on the potential appeal of any repackaged Muslim Brotherhood grouping is the heavy minority make-up (35 percent) of the Syrian population that is generally opposed to any Islamist domination. End Summary.

14. (C) TALKING ONLY THEORETICALLY: It is difficult to assess clearly the potential power of the Muslim Brothers at a time when the Asad regime has destroyed the movement and engages in ongoing repression (and reinforcement of the exiled status of the MB's leadership) to ensure they are not able to rebuild. It is also difficult to assess their potential support relative to other political currents in Syria, such as pan-Arabism, Syrian nationalism, and Ba'athism, given the current lack of free and fair elections. When asked about the power of the Muslim Brothers, interlocutors often inquire whether one is considering a situation "of full democracy" or one in which the regime still controls elections and the political environment. In free and fair elections, some type of Islamist political current would almost certainly play a major role in Syria, although it is doubtful that the Muslim Brothers could reconstitute themselves to assume that role, given present conditions.

15. (C) VARIOUS SCENARIOS TO CONSIDER: Observers assert that if the regime were still in control of the electoral process but wanted to make a show of free elections, it would manipulate the situation, as in Egypt, to win and to show that their chief rivals were extremist MB-type Islamists. Some note, in addition, that a sudden collapse of the Asad regime, possibly caused by outside intervention, might remove some of the natural restraints on an MB resurgence. The result could be a sudden spike in MB/radical Islamist power, which would likely be nourished by the group's takeover -- from discredited collaborationist Islamic clerics -- of the extensive network of mosques and other Islamic institutions present in Syria. The more likely scenario for the 2007 elections is that the regime allows new political parties but prohibits any based on religion (or ethnic factors), preventing an Islamist bloc from forming, whether a conservative, MB-dominated one or a more moderate Islamic bloc excluding the MB (and possibly allied with some Sunni businessmen).

16. (C) MB PARTY ORGANIZATION COMPLETELY DESTROYED: The influence of the Muslim Brothers is limited nowadays because they are weak on the ground in Syria. The SARG destroyed their political organization in the early 1980's and they have not recovered because of ongoing SARG repression. An entire network of competing Islamic institutions and personalities now exists in Syria, which would oppose any reasserting of Muslim Brother influence, noted moderate Islamist and MP XXXXXXXXXXXX (although many in this network, including XXXXXXXXXXXX, support allowing the MB to return to Syria). In addition, the efforts of Muslim Brother leaders in exile to moderate their positions to make them more politically attractive in Syria (and less threatening to minorities and to the regime) has reinforced a perception that they are opportunistic, cannot be trusted, and will say anything to augment their influence. Their recent flirtation with former Syrian VP Khaddam has reinforced this widely shared perception of their opportunism.

17. (C) OTHER CONSTRAINING FACTORS: In addition to SARG

repression, there are some natural constraints on the ability of Islamist groups like the MB to dominate Syrian politics. There is a developed tradition of nationalist politics in Syria, some of it pan-Syrian, some of it pan-Arab, some of it practiced by former communists. Much of it has been dominated in the past by, for example, Christian political figures and intellectuals. Hence, there is a tradition of minority politicians attracting Sunni Arab voters, according to XXXXXXXXXXXX, a Christian MP from Damascus who depends on Sunni Arab voters for some of his mandate. (Note: He belongs to an offshoot of the secular Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party.) Political dissident XXXXXXXXXXXX put it somewhat differently to PolChief, noting that "our society is predominantly Islamic, but our politics have always been diverse. I am a Sunni, but a Communist."

18. (C) THIRD OF POPULATION ANTI-ISLAMIST MINORITIES: Most observers assess that the potential power of the Muslim Brothers (and other similarly inclined Islamist political groups) in Syria will also be constrained because of Syria's population mosaic. They note that minorities constitute at least 35 percent of the Syrian population. Although 75 percent of the population is Sunni, ten percent of that total is Kurdish, rather than Arab. The Kurdish population, in general, identifies more with strains of Kurdish nationalism than with Sunni politics and considers itself part of the minority population of Syria, along with Christians (ten percent), Druze (three percent), Alawites (12 percent), and smaller groups, including Shiites, Ismailis, Yazidis, and others. In greater Damascus alone there are some one million Christians, representing 20 percent of that important population center.

19. (C) Although some of these minorities are Muslim, all oppose Sunni Arab domination and would not support any conservative Islamist political current dominated by a group like the Muslim Brotherhood. (Note: In the Palestinian territories, by point of contrast, where Hamas, an offshoot of the Muslim Brothers, recently won an overwhelming political victory, Sunni Arabs make up some 97 percent of the Palestinian population.)

110. (C) CLEAVAGES IN ANY ISLAMIST BLOC?: Politicians and other observers disagree about the potential level of support for an Islamist bloc. Some, such as MP XXXXXXXXXXXX, posit relatively high overall potential support for overtly Islamic political alternatives (up to 50 percent of potential voters), while others, like former MP XXXXXXXXXXXX, provide lower assessments of the size of any potential Islamic current. Nonetheless, many point to significant cleavages within this potential bloc of (largely Sunni Arab) voters. XXXXXXXXXXXX points to divisions between conservative Muslims, reform-oriented Muslims, secular Sunnis, and a tiny segment (one percent or less) of fundamentalists (with only a

minority of them advocating violence). Others like XXXXXXXXXXXX (and former political prisoner) XXXXXXXXXXXX say that fundamentalists probably group, perhaps as much as ten percent of the total, but concur that significant cleavages exist and that elections would compel competition among these groups for Muslim voters.

¶11. (C) MUSLIM-MINORITY COALITIONS CREATING SPLITS?: There is also a long tradition in Syrian politics of Sunni politicians straddling cleavages between these different Muslim tendencies, for individual political gain, and a related tradition of these politicians building individual coalitions with non-Muslim voting blocs (who would oppose any Sunni Islamist domination). These traditions, according to former MP XXXXXXXXXXXX (a Sunni politician well-practiced in both traditions), could exacerbate existing cleavages in any potential Islamist bloc.

¶12. (C) SYRIAN POLITICAL TRADITION ALSO A LIMITING FACTOR: Modern Syrian political history and tradition also point away from any MB/radical Islamist takeover in future elections. While the MB or their forerunners have been around in Syria since the 1920's, they have never been very successful in Syrian politics, and certainly have never come close to attaining a majority in any election, note observers such as historian XXXXXXXXXXXX and dissident XXXXXXXXXXXX. Also, Sunni political and business elites, who tend to have community influence through their employment power and prestige far beyond their actual numbers, have no tradition of supporting calls for the full implementation of Sharia law or the formation of an Islamic state. Finally, there is no history of a decades-long foreign military occupation of the

type endured by Palestinians that would radicalize the Syrian population, added XXXXXXXXXXXX.

¶13. (C) AS IS DEVELOPMENT OF ISLAM IN SYRIA: In addition, Islam in modern Syria (unlike in neighboring Turkey, with its decades-long Kemalist tradition in the early 20th century of official suppression of Islam) has been allowed to flourish and develop at its own pace, notes xxxxxxxx. This has allowed moderate, dissident, and skeptical tendencies within the Islamic community to develop and provide buffers against radical Islamic doctrine. There have also been no violent societal upheavals, of the kind that Iraq has recently witnessed, that would encourage frightened, mass lurches towards more extreme Islamic tendencies, said XXXXXXXXXXXX.

SECHE